

Worship as a Family Activity

Joseph S. David

“You shall lay up these words of Mine in your heart and in your soul.... You shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

Deuteronomy 11:18,19

The strength of a home, and thus of the church, comes from the effort to keep the Lord’s law and His leading in mind. Putting this precept into practice in a general sense involves all our actions and words. In this article, though, I will concentrate on the literal idea of “these words of Mine” as being the stories of the Old and New Testaments. I know of no better way to follow this precept than by having regular family worship.

In thinking about worship as a family activity, I came up with nine major benefits that it brings:

1. It teaches the stories from the Word.
2. It unites the family and strengthens the marriage.
3. It forms a little heaven.
4. It passes on the deepest values of the parents.
5. It focuses on the Word as a source of truth.
6. It serves as a forum for discussion.
7. It encourages the parents to evaluate themselves.
8. It helps parents increase their own understanding of doctrine.
9. If the father leads worship, it provides him with a distinct part in child-rearing and strengthens his marriage.

1. IT TEACHES THE STORIES FROM THE WORD.

There is a wealth of story material in the Word, particularly from Genesis through Kings. Ideally we should all know about the people involved, the events that took place, when and where they took place, and have a general knowledge of the chronology and geography of all the sweep of history from Abram to the Isle of Patmos. All these events take place spiritually within our minds, and the basis for understanding these spiritual changes lies in these stories. What better way to teach them than by doing it on a daily basis with children who absorb these stories like sponges?

We are told that the literal sense is especially meaningful for children, but it is important for adults as well because the stories from the Old and New Testaments are essential to our understanding of doctrine. While we shouldn’t remain in the literal sense alone, the *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* tells us how important this ultimate sense is. The sixth chapter is headed, “By means of the sense of the letter of the Word there is conjunction with the Lord and association with angels.” In *Arcana Coelestia* 9035 we read, “For the truths of the literal sense stored up in a person’s natural memory form there as it were a field for the mental view of the internal person.”

2. IT UNITES THE FAMILY AND STRENGTHENS THE MARRIAGE.

The act of having worship as a family is uniting in itself, but there can be a more deliberate uniting by directly referring to the shared beliefs of the parents. Our children need to understand what we believe and why. They need to realize that the Lord leads us all, even Mother and Father, and that the parents are

acting as agents to help their children follow the Lord. Parents can illustrate this by explaining that they don't steal or take the Lord's name in vain. We need to show our children that we are all trying to follow what the Lord says. Parents are not trying to establish a dictatorship where their word is law and children have to obey. They are trying to understand, and help the children understand, what the Lord's way is. This is the way of a family united under the Lord's governance.

3. IT FORMS A LITTLE HEAVEN.

Worship involving children should begin as soon as they can participate. The angels that are associated with children will undoubtedly delight in their attempts to learn the Lord's prayer and simple songs. Later on, as stories are read to them or told to them, angels will be present as the children listen.

When children become old enough to read, they can sometimes be asked to do so aloud, particularly if it is a story with which they are familiar. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church says that angels are especially delighted when a little child reads the Word reverently. And, of course, worship invites the Lord to be present. He tells us that "where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

4. IT PASSES ON THE DEEPEST VALUES OF THE PARENTS.

Most parents want to give their children good things, and most parents want their children to be happy. We know that the best way to make them happy is to lead them to love the Lord and his Word. This will make them happy to eternity.

If we have accepted the Lord's Word for ourselves, we will be trying to make it our most valued possession. When our children are small, our own struggle to place such value on the Word may just be beginning, but if it is not valued yet in our will, it can still be valued in our understanding. This is the "pearl of great price" that we want our children to value, and we need to tell them so. We could say, "We love the Lord, and we love the Word because it tells us about Him and about how we can live the way He wants us to." We don't want our children to be ignorant of what we value and why we value it.

5. IT FOCUSES ON THE WORD AS A SOURCE OF TRUTH.

Worship focuses our attention on the Word. If we value it and want our children to value it, should we let it sit on a shelf and gather dust? If we read from it daily and talk about it, it becomes not just an object to be venerated, but something more—a source of stories, and later on, ideas, and someday, truths.

The Word should have a special place in the worship service. It should be opened and closed reverently to mark the beginning and ending of the service. Do our children know that the big book way up on the chancel at church, used in such a solemn fashion, is the same book we have at home? Children should be taught to treat it carefully. But at the same time, it is to be used, read from, and referred to.

6. IT SERVES AS A FORUM FOR DISCUSSION.

Worship services can be flexible to fill needs. Generally, stories can be used more or less in order from the Word. If there is a family problem that needs to be talked about, stories from the Word can be used to lead up to a discussion. In such a case, very general texts, such as the golden rule or the Ten Commandments, can be a good place to start. Such talks can be about a wide range of problems—hitting, lying, gossiping, envy, behavior at parties, premarital sex. These talks should be used only for problems that are general. If any one child has a specific problem, it should probably be handled one-on-one rather than with the whole family present. If a worship service leads to a general discussion without being planned, let it go on and thank the Lord for the opportunity.

7. IT ENCOURAGES PARENTS TO EVALUATE THEMSELVES.

Having worship with children and talking to them about obeying the Lord may bring us up short when we realize that we haven't done so well in our own actions. We mustn't let this stop us from continuing to teach. This is not hypocrisy. If we want to learn truths and apply them to our lives, the Lord will always be showing us new ways to do so by making our evils apparent. If we accept what He shows and try to heed it, then we ourselves are doing what we want our children to do.

The very effort of organizing and having regular worship is a choice of values. When we make the effort and take the time, we are putting the value of the worship service and the goals it serves in a higher place than any alternative activities.

8. IT HELPS PARENTS INCREASE THEIR OWN UNDERSTANDING OF DOCTRINE.

Having regular worship, particularly as our children get older, pushes us into a greater understanding of doctrine. We learn the stories; we come to appreciate the entire sweep of the history of Israel. Because we know there is an internal sense, we begin to look for the connections. As we are asked questions by our older children, we have to study. There is no shame in having to say, "I don't know. I'll have to look it up." In fact, doing so is good because it emphasizes the Word as the source of truth, and emphasizes that the parents are being led by the Lord too.

A very valuable tool to use is Potts' Concordance to the Heavenly Doctrine because the key words in any story can be looked up. By fitting together the internal meanings of key words, one can often see what the overall internal sense of the story is. Care must be taken to keep these interpretations open to later corrections. Few parents are trained theologians, and we do not want to mislead our children. Two general safeguards are (1) to read all of the references in the Concordance so that we have an overall picture of how the word or phrase is used, and (2) to read in full some of the passages listed.

9. IF THE FATHER LEADS WORSHIP, IT PROVIDES HIM WITH A DISTINCT PART IN CHILD-REARING AND STRENGTHENS HIS MARRIAGE.

This last item is not a benefit of having worship in itself, but rather for the one who conducts it. Women are usually the primary care-givers of young children. Children hear their mother's voice or another female voice all day long. Simply because of its rarity, the father's voice and his attention to his children are fixed on avidly by them. Their world is enlarged and given a wider scope and sense of order when both parents are involved. The father, by leading the family in worship, works not in competition with the mother, but in concert. This is of very great use, particularly for boys, who seem prone to accept their father's values more than those of their mother.

Obviously, in order for the father to be effective in giving worship, the worship interlude must not be the only contact he has with his children. If he is already a loved and trusted figure in their lives, then worship becomes an easy extension of his relationship to them, and the children are more apt to listen attentively.

This dual leadership, some from the feminine side and some from the masculine, also helps to shape children's minds to appreciate the differences between the sexes and make them comfortable with themselves as girls or boys. It must be recognized that it is not always possible to have a father conduct worship. In such cases, worship should not be neglected but should be done by the mother.

Conjugal Love tells us that a wife loves her husband's moral wisdom. I think that part of moral wisdom is how he takes doctrine and relates it to his life. If he conducts worship, teaches his children the stories of the Word and about the Lord, then I believe he is exhibiting some part of moral wisdom. In so doing he is presenting to his wife something for her to love. What better gift can he give to her?

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILY WORSHIP:

- Start small. With little children, just open the Word, say the prayer, sing a song, and close the Word. Let each child put out a candle.
- Two and three-year-olds love stories. Read the story to yourself first, and then in worship read only a few key sentences and tell the rest of the story. This gets easier with practice.
- Keep it short, especially with little children.
- Be pragmatic about disturbances. With one child you can just stop, explain that you want him or her to behave, and resume the next night. With more than one child, remove the disturber. If things get out of hand, just stop and close the Word. Don't get angry or worry too much. Children do behave better as they get older.
- With a wide age range of children, tell the story briefly to the youngest, then give that one a quiet toy and review the story in more detail with the older ones.
- For little children, use only the "best" stories from the Word. There are good stories in the prophets, but a lot of abstract ones as well. As children get older, repeat the familiar stories but add more obscure and more complex ones as well.
- Don't be afraid to edit. David and Goliath is a wonderful story, but it's a whole chapter, and has to be shortened—more for little children, less for older ones. Go over it and mark what you want to read.
- Leave out, for little children, scary and bloody stories.
- Don't be afraid to repeat favorite stories over and over.
- As children get older, read stories from the historical parts of the Word in chronological order.
- End the stories (when applicable) with a moral lesson, e.g., "Adam and Eve shouldn't have eaten the fruit of the tree, should they?" or "When Samuel heard the Lord call, he answered, didn't he?"
- A long but interesting story can be carried over for two or three nights with five and six-year-olds.
- As children get older, occasionally give a wide-ranging overview of a segment of Israelitish history so that individual stories fit into place. Remember that this is a chronology that happens spiritually to each one of us.
- Also with older children, have some worship talks about the Lord's prayer, the Ten Commandments, *etc.*
- In the days before Christmas, read all the prophecies about the Lord's birth.
- Try to have worship every evening except Sunday, but do so without rigidity. Sometimes it just has to be omitted. Find the most convenient time, take the phone off the hook, and put a sign on the door saying something to the effect that the children are busy now.
- Don't procrastinate. Start now.

SUMMARY

Remember what you are trying to accomplish: (1) that your children know the stories from the Word; (2) that they know that the doctrines of the church are from the Word; and (3) that they know that you consider the Word and its teachings the most important things in your life.

I believe that having regular family worship is the most important thing we can do in raising a family. Even when children attend religious schools, it remains the most important family activity.